Civil War Book Review

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The Civil War Journal Of Mary Adelia Byers

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Review

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Phillips, Samuel R. *The Civil War Journal of Mary Adelia Byers.* University of Oklahoma Press, $19.95 ISBN 9780806143958

The Civil War Journal of Mary Adelia Byers: A Valuable Look at Adolescence in the Civil War Era

Even in 2016, the home front is still a fairly new theater of operations in Civil War studies, being only about a generation old. As late as 1989, social and family historian Maris A. Vinovskis could write that, despite many thousands of books and articles on the American Civil War, "we do not know much about the effects of the Civil War on everyday life in the United States." Surveying the field, he adds, "Very little has been published on civilian life in the North or the South during the war years...."

Samuel R. Phillips' *The Civil War Journal of Mary Adelia Byers* is a nice addition to the available sources in this theater. Mary Adelia Byers was in 1862 a fifteen-year old girl living in Batesville, Arkansas, when it was occupied for a time by Union Major General Samuel R. Curtis' Trans-Mississippi Army of the Southwest, recent victors at the Battle of Pea Ridge in northwest Arkansas. Her family had moved to Batesville in 1837 from Ohio like many American families to find greater opportunity and prosperity. After the death of Mary's father, John, in 1855 from tuberculosis, his older brother William, a lawyer and landowner, generously settled his brother's estate and watched over his family.

Women's Civil War diaries are not unknown, though only a fraction of them were kept by young girls. Some women immediately attracted attention to their journals in Civil War histories because of the activities they undertook in wartime or for the positions they occupied in society that gave them a unique perspective. Mary Chesnut comes to mind; the fascination with Mary Chesnut's diary stems in large part from the perspective it offers, that of an adult woman and an able commentator with a mature and sophisticated point of view. Chesnut lived at the seat of the rebellion, was in contact with male participants among the

higher ranks of the Confederate Army, and was connected by marriage and status to highest levels of Southern society. Like many such works of history, it offers a top-down view.

Women also served as spies, nurses, and even as soldiers, and the apparently idiosyncratic character of at least two of those roles long ago caught the attention of students of the war. Belle Boyd, Antonia Ford, and Harriet Tubman spied; Clara Barton, Dorothea Dix, and Louisa May Alcott nursed; and Frances Clayton, Jennie Hodgers, and Mary Galloway among others fought. Women young and old often undertook the role assigned by the French Committee of Public Safety to the aged--modified suitably to fit the needs of the Confederacy or the Union as needs be--who were to "betake themselves to the public places in order to arouse the courage of the warriors and preach the hatred of kings and the unity of the Republic."

Young women like Mary Byers who did not have such an exciting war attracted little attention from historians. Until recently, most of the Americans who lived during the war, whether they stayed home or went to war, remained unknown. Only a comparative few left significant records of their experiences in any case, which makes the recovery and publication of accounts like Mary's important to help to resolve the somewhat gauzy and incomplete picture of the home front into something more distinct and useful. Mary's diary, if not unique, is also a useful source for studying the younger voices from Civil War era, something not widely available.

Mary's is a young girl's voice who seems at the same time to be much older. If fifteen seems a very young age nowadays, it is hard to see Mary as comparable to American teenager of the same calendar age. After reading a few pages of her diary, it seems obvious and not just the repetition of a worn platitude to say that people grew up faster in the old days. It is hard to imagine such a document being written when so much modern social discourse is limited to 140 characters or to Photoshopped images plastered with a meme suitable to not very thoughtful consideration. Her education is to be wondered at: how does a young girl in Arkansas know anything about Drury Lane Theater and the *Great Eastern*? It gives the reader a slight measure of a society that, if not as connected as people imagine themselves to be in modern times, still accommodated the spread of ideas and news over great distances.

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As diaries must, Mary's includes passages of self-examination: "I am prone to judge people too harshly. I must quit it for I wrong others as well as myself. But I am always boasting of my perception and I find out to my chagrin that I am very often sadly mistaken." (7) It also contains some scenes that are timeless. On July 20, 1862, Mary's diary entry records the ride home from the Fairchild's Sun Fish plantation north of Batesville in company with eighteen-year old John Smith. In words that many other generations of young women in life and in literature have spoken, she writes, "I don't understand him...." The conversation that plays out next would have been new to Mary and John--even their names are iconic--but familiar and touching for many later couples facing similar circumstances.

"This evening coming home as we passed the telegraph he asked if I wouldn't send him some dispatches when they got to Little Rock. I said, "Of course," when the telegraph is established. He then asked if I would not answer his letters when he wrote to me. I said that I would, but my letters wouldn't be interesting, for I couldn't write good letters. He said that was what the girls always said. We then spoke of drinking and playing cards. I asked him neither to touch liquor or cards until he returned. He replied that he would not for one reason, because it was my advice; that he would tell me when he came back (and he expected to get a furlough in about a month), and I should see how good he was at keeping promises." One smiles slightly at the obvious modesty of Mary's claim in the face of contrary evidence that she could not "write good letters," but might wonder at the same time how John knew "what the girls always said." Naturally this archetypal entry ends with an archetypal coda: "When I came home I told Ma; she does not want me to correspond with any gentlemen." (13-14)

Diaries are often a pleasure to read and not always because they advance scholarship, yield new understanding, or reveal unknown secrets. Diaries may or may not change our view of the past in any significant way. Often the information they offer simply confirms the unremarkable sorts of things that the reader knows already to be true and common. Nonetheless they can have a voyeuristic quality. They provide valuable and sometimes startlingly intimate windows into the past even when they do not tell us anything new. They simply confirm, like an ancient Greek play to a modern audience, that people are fairly constant in their emotions and behaviors and remain unchanged over centuries, let alone over a few decades.

Phillips, who is Mary's great-grandson, makes good use of footnotes to identify many of individuals mentioned in the diary. The use of footnotes is to be commended and will be appreciated by anyone who dislikes the intrusion that comes from searching for the correct endnote. The reader would have benefited from an introductory section that provided more background to the diary. The few pages of the introduction cover family background, but apply only a very broad-brush to current events. Head notes for the chapters or for selected time periods would also have helped with context. Nonetheless, the diary provides a useful contribution to the history of the Civil War at home that is also a pleasure to read.

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[1] Maris A. Vinovskis, ed. Toward a Social History of the American Civil War: Exploratory Essays. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990. Pg. 1-2. Vinovskis said that more than 50,000 books and articles had been written by 1989. That number has no doubt increased remarkably in the intervening two and a half decades, since there is no indication that interest--and the market--in the subject has faded.

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